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Media distortions endanger justice

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — I'm a believer in the adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

The USA's legal system, while frustratingly slow, is steady and sure. Safeguards abound — including checks and balances that have Congress and the executive branch keeping a watchful eye on each other's interests.

Since Watergate, a nasty negative perception has developed in news media observations of our law enforcement and justice agencies. Questions of motives, ethics, and secrecy are brought up all too routinely. The newest development in this syndrome is the arbitrary cry for special prosecutors, often heard long before formal charges have even been filed.

A special prosecutor is just that: special. Entrusted with broad powers and given a specific agenda, the secret of their success is often their extraordinary investigative role. Please note, however, that they serve as one of those safeguards mentioned above — an *exception* to the rule. It's a role that should not be institutionalized.

One of the strengths of a free society is the maintenance of the consent and the confidence of the governed. To assume the worst about the motivations of public servants — *habitually* — can be dangerous. It dulls the public senses and challenges authority to the point of being anti-social. Constant accusations, for example, that the attorney general or CIA director cannot fulfill his sensitive

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duties without political prejudice are irresponsible at best.

Decisions whether to investigate and/or prosecute such people as labor leader Jackie Presser, Louisiana Gov. Edwin Edwards, or lobbyist Michael Deaver could be just politically motivated. But is that likely in this glass-house media age?

The current fuss over the Deaver and Presser situations casts political questions on the motives of the accusers themselves. To remove any ethical doubts and speculations, Attorney General Edwin Meese removed himself from the process of reviewing or prosecuting any possible case against his political acquaintance, Deaver. And the administration has convened a federal grand jury to examine the Presser investigation.

The pessimists, special interests, some politicians and their media allies would have us believe that nothing good can come out of the Justice Department unless pressure is applied. But are the administration's actions a result of zealous news media demands or the logical progression of our legal system at work?

There's hardly anyone more cynical than I am when it comes to analyzing politicians and their machinations. However, there is an important line between healthy skepticism and conspiratorial paranoia.